

**How Nashville Moves**  
**Recommendations to Mayor O’Connell**  
**November 21, 2023**

**POLICY BRIEF**

Mayor O’Connell took office at a time of incredible opportunity for transit and transportation infrastructure in Nashville. His administration has a mandate to pursue a bold vision for a modern transportation system that reduces Nashvillians’ transportation costs and helps them get where they need to go. At the same time, it must maintain its focus on implementing and accelerating existing projects that will benefit Nashvillians today.

Mayor O’Connell charged this committee with issuing recommendations that will help him advance a safe, multimodal transit system while simultaneously investing in transportation infrastructure that benefits all Nashvillians.<sup>1</sup> We approached our work with the understanding that moving around Nashville today has become increasingly difficult for drivers, transit riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians alike. Nashvillians’ commute was recently rated the worst in the nation.<sup>2</sup> And rates of traffic and pedestrian fatalities here have risen sharply.<sup>3</sup>

With a sense of urgency born of these reports and others like them, we have aligned on a list of recommendations that we hope will help guide the O’Connell Administration as it sets a course for Nashville’s future.

**I. Guiding Principles**

While many of this committee’s recommendations are designed to be implemented in the short term, we begin with guiding principles intended to help steer Mayor O’Connell’s administration throughout his time in office.

- Building on conversations about the need for a modern, multimodal transportation system that Mayor O’Connell has been leading for over two decades, the O’Connell Administration should focus on bold solutions that are backed by data and in line with community needs.
- At the same time, Mayor O’Connell should accelerate the development of safe, reliable, accessible transportation infrastructure that Nashvillians can build their lives around. This looks like, for example, more sidewalks; safer intersections; more crosswalks; more bikeways; reliable, frequent buses; comfortable bus stops; and safe ways to access transit.
- Mayor O’Connell should continue to serve as Nashville’s lead transit champion. He should use his platform to help set, deliver on, and celebrate the city’s transportation agenda and progress made toward realizing it.

- Nashvillians' ability to move around our city without driving a car – and thus our ability to access the places and opportunities that make Nashville a vibrant city – is inequitable. The O'Connell Administration's decisions about our city's transportation future should meaningfully and continually engage transit-dependent riders, diverse and traditionally under-represented communities, and Nashville's neighborhood leaders. Once plans are made, decision-makers should remain accountable to the communities that helped shape them. Among other things, they should provide regular updates about how community feedback was incorporated – or why it was not.

## **II. Policy Recommendations**

While these recommendations vary in implementation time, actions on each could begin in the near future.

### **A. Mayor O'Connell should use his platform to help rebuild Nashvillians' trust in our transportation system.**

If the O'Connell Administration is going to expand Nashville's transit system and improve multimodal infrastructure, Nashvillians will need to regain confidence in the system we currently have. Mayor O'Connell has earned a reputation as one of Nashville's biggest transit and multimodal transportation champions. As Mayor, he should help grow Nashvillians' trust by highlighting and celebrating the bright spots in our current transportation system.

Mayor O'Connell and his team should lift up recent transportation-related progress and explain how it will benefit Nashvillians. For example, they should highlight the fact that Metro's new traffic management center will soon enable the Nashville Department of Transportation and Multimodal Infrastructure (NDOT) to monitor and manage the flow of traffic on city streets in real time.<sup>4</sup> The ability to adjust traffic signal timing in accordance with traffic patterns and special events should dramatically improve the flow of traffic in downtown and throughout the county. They should also draw attention to the upcoming completion of Connect Downtown, which will identify strategies to improve mobility and help reduce traffic congestion in the downtown core.<sup>5</sup> And the planned Spring 2024 opening of North Nashville's new transit hub will certainly be cause for celebration.<sup>6</sup>

The O'Connell Administration should also be upfront about investments Nashville still needs to make in order for Nashvillians to experience the full benefit of these improvements. For example, the new traffic management center will be capable of remotely operating traffic signals to ensure they are responding to changes in traffic patterns, but it cannot help Nashvillians stuck in traffic until Metro upgrades its traffic lights county-wide to allow for remote operation. Nashvillians need to know where progress is being made, but also where improvements are still needed.

**B. Mayor O’Connell should make an early determination about a transit referendum and then work with key stakeholders – including transit-dependent riders – to shape a plan that works for Nashville.**

The failure of Nashville’s 2018 transit referendum holds many lessons, including the importance of holding any vote about dedicated, long-term funding for transit during a high-turnout election that maximizes its chance of success.<sup>7</sup> November 2024 is the closest high-turnout election. If the O’Connell Administration decides to pursue a referendum then, its leaders will need to move quickly on a few fronts:

- **Develop a transit plan that works for Nashvillians.** Center equity at the heart of the plan, which should focus on increasing Nashvillians’ access to frequent, high-quality transit and transportation infrastructure. Prioritize community engagement during the multistage approval process the IMPROVE Act requires of any Tennessee city that seeks to hold a transit referendum.<sup>8</sup> Commit to transparent decision-making. Any transit plan requires trade-offs, and voters deserve insight into how those trade-offs are made.
- **Build an independent and inclusive transit advocacy coalition.** Form partnerships with a diverse group of community leaders who can help mobilize Nashville’s existing pro-transit constituencies, as well as Nashvillians who have not yet been organized around the issue. Prioritize early, inclusive community engagement and build on conversations that began around the 2018 *Let’s Move Nashville* plan.<sup>9</sup> Empower a diverse bench of champions outside of the Mayor’s Office, e.g., community leaders, members of the Metro Council, and Metro department heads.
- **Consistently communicate how investments in transit and transportation infrastructure will benefit all Nashvillians.** Tennessee’s IMPROVE Act allows funds dedicated to transit-related investments to be used for sidewalk and road improvements that are adjacent to transit projects. Such improvements will help drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians move around town more safely. And transit helps Nashvillians connect with economic and recreational opportunities. Any transit campaign should emphasize widely applicable benefits like these and others in its messaging.

**C. Mayor O’Connell and his team should regularly convene leaders at relevant Metro departments to prioritize and tackle current challenges and accelerate solutions related to transportation infrastructure and transit.**

Daily operational barriers should not get in the way of planned transit and infrastructure improvements. Mayor O’Connell can help move Nashville’s transportation and infrastructure plans to reality by regularly bringing together department heads to identify lower-cost, high-priority projects and to unlock issues that require interdepartmental coordination.

For example, these convenings could help break down barriers to NDOT’s implementation of Vision Zero, Nashville’s comprehensive strategy to eliminate pedestrian and traffic deaths.<sup>10</sup>

Current Metro efforts to increase bicyclist and pedestrian safety – like a Complete Streets roadway redesign project on Main Street and an effort on Fifth Street to make a bikeway connection to the greenway leading to Shelby Park – involve multiple departments and could be accelerated with more regular coordination.

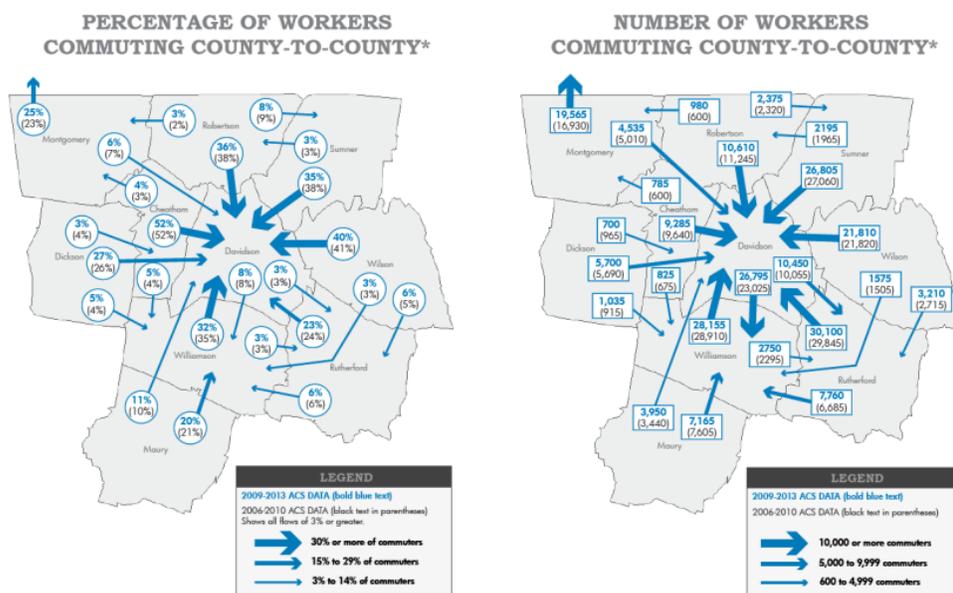
This sort of collaboration would also help Metro approach the federal and state government with a unified voice and a shared list of priorities across departments. Any decisions about such prioritization should be made with a focus on transparency, accountability, and community engagement.

Progress on planned transit and infrastructure improvements may require the attention of a Mayor’s Office staff member or team separate from the one focused on any upcoming transit referendum.

**D. Mayor O’Connell should partner with other Middle Tennessee elected officials to deepen the regional commitment to transit.**

Regional coordination is critical to any long-term plan aimed at minimizing the time Nashvillians sit in traffic. According to Census data, one of every three Middle Tennessee commuters works outside of the county where they live.<sup>11</sup> That number grows to nearly one in two when looking at Middle Tennesseans outside of Nashville and Clarksville/Montgomery County.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 3-13. Cross-County Commuting Patterns, 2010 and 2013**



Source: American Community Survey 2009-2013 (Blue), 2010 Census (Black), \*Commuter flows of 3 percent or more of total.

Organizations such as the Middle Tennessee Mayors Caucus, the Metropolitan Planning Organization, and the Regional Transportation Authority allow Middle Tennessee mayors to collaborate on issues of regional importance, including the need for region-wide transportation

solutions. Mayor O’Connell and his team should play a leading role in these organizations’ discussions about regional commitments to transit.

Mayor O’Connell should prioritize deepening relationships with mayors in the region whose support will be essential to a future transportation plan. In furtherance of these relationships, the O’Connell Administration should ensure that every Davidson County transportation plan, including any plan associated with a future referendum, shows a clear connection to the region.

### **III. Acknowledgements**

The committee is grateful for the contributions of the following individuals, who each joined one of our meetings to share their expertise:

- Diana Alarcon, Director, Nashville Department of Transportation and Multimodal Infrastructure
- Steve Bland, Chief Executive Officer, WeGo Public Transit
- Michael Davies, Partner, GDA Wins
- Michael Skipper, Executive Director, Greater Nashville Regional Council

We are proud to share these recommendations with Mayor O’Connell and his new administration. We hope they will help accelerate Nashville’s path toward a robust transportation system that benefits all Nashvillians.

Committee members:

- Dr. Alex Jahangir (chair)
- Glenn Farner
- Erin Hafkenschiel
- Shanna Singh Hughey
- Ashley Northington
- Stephanie Teatro
- Gail Carr Williams
- Senator Jeff Yarbro

## Endnotes

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